

On Television

Leanne Mella 1994

Set in Motion: The New York State Council on the Arts Celebrates 30 Years of Independents. 1994.

On a late October afternoon in 1976, just before the evening rush hour, a man joined the flow of pedestrian traffic on the northeast corner of 23rd Street and Park Avenue in Manhattan. Dressed in a fatigue-style jacket and jeans, he began to slowly walk east toward Lexington Avenue. To the casual observer, the man seemed slightly disoriented; from time to time he appeared to be speaking into the collar of his jacket. However, this was not the behavior of an eccentric New Yorker, but a street performance by artist Bill Beirne. The piece, entitled *Cross Reference*, was a week-long exploration of public image. Sponsored by The Kitchen Center for Video and Music, it was simultaneously cablecast live on two public access channels of Manhattan Cable Television. (1)

As Beirne continued walking, two camera operators leaned out of the windows of an eighth floor studio in a building across the street. From that vantage point, using walkie-talkies, they chose the pedestrians who would become the momentary subjects of the artist's investigation of persona. These individuals, caught on camera, occupied their own channel space opposite Beirne's. One of a series of performances from the early seventies dealing with constructions of the self, *Cross Reference* was innovative for its radical break with the conventional form of television. Because Manhattan Cable was willing to transmit the program with no further contextualization over two channels simultaneously, Beirne was able to create a single performance event that required the audience to continually switch between channels to view the piece in its entirety.

Earlier the same month, Douglas Davis had presented a live, two-way cablecast between Anthology Film Archives and Manhattan Cable TV. The piece, *Reading Brecht in 3/4 Time*, also employed Citizens-Band radio, the computer BBS of its day. In April 1976, Davis's performance of *Three Silent and Secret Acts* live from The Kitchen and Manhattan Cable TV, had been facilitated by Manhattan Cable's installation of a direct link to their transmission facility from The Kitchen's exhibition space at 484 Broome Street. Davis followed these projects with a live, multi-point cablecast from the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1977. *Four Places Two Figures One Ghost* was the first live performance telecast from a New York City museum.

Each of Davis's projects attempted to use TV as a private medium, one usually viewed in personal space, and all shared a belief in the potential of television as an interactive medium. Thus, the live performance of *Reading Brecht*, in which Davis read "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication," Bertolt Brecht's 1932 treatise on radio as a genuine two-way communications medium, became the inaugural event of Cable Soho. This consortium of artists and arts organizations in lower Manhattan was formed to find interactive uses for the public access channels then available in New York City. (2)

Throughout the 1970s, numerous individuals and groups combined and recombined to produce innovative and challenging programs and performances using communications technology. Some of those with the most long-lasting effects may only be perceived as a blip in time: as early as 1971, the Everson Museum's video curator, David Ross, produced live call-in shows with artists on WCNY in Syracuse; in 1976, Liza Bear and Keith Sonnier's *Send/Receive Satellite Network*, a project of the Center for New Art Activities, linked artists in southern California and New York at a temporary outdoor performance space on the Hudson River landfill, now the site of Battery Park City; and in 1981, Douglas Davis used a live satellite link between the Whitney Museum and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris to perform his *Double Entendre*.

All these projects reflect a particularly fertile period for artists working in television. During this time conceptual and visual artists, independent producers and the organizations exhibiting their work, used

both direct and institutional support from the New York State Council on the Arts to commission and present diverse cable and broadcast projects in New York State, on national television, and in closed-circuit, low-power and satellite transmitted experimental works. In funding a broad array of projects exploring the creative uses of television beginning in the early 1970s, NYSCA had seeded the bed on several fronts. It supported groups that were using small-format video as a means of democratizing the media; funded public television stations across the state in an effort both to make broadcast-quality facilities accessible to artists, and put their work on TV; and awarded grants for artists working with museums and adventurous cable operators.

Low-cost production facilities and sidelong glances at power politics have been a staple of alternative TV since its inception. In the summer of 1976, the Democratic National Convention was held in New York City at Madison Square Garden. The convention that nominated Jimmy Carter provided grist for the alternative TV mill, and a loose consortium of independent producers from New York State and around the country converged to produce five nights of live and taped coverage. Calling themselves Image Union, the group included members of Media Bus/Lanesville TV, Video Repertorie, TVTV and others. *The Five-Day Bicycle Race*, as the show was called, was cablecast live for three hours each night on Manhattan Cable Public Access Channel D. Using coveted sets of press credentials, several crews visited the convention floor to shoot interviews with delegates, politicians and, of course, the ubiquitous members of the mainstream media. Other crews spread out across the city to shoot the short stories and engaging sidebars for which so many of these producers are justifiably so well known. (3)

The group would then return to the same funky East 23rd Street studio used for Bill Beirne's street performance, and which, in 1980 became home to the weekly cable program produced by the fledgling Paper Tiger Television collective. There, they would edit half-inch, black-and-white, open-reel Portapak footage or simply roll raw tape into the often humorous, and occasionally provocative alternative convention coverage. Image Union completed its coverage on election night with *Mock Turtle Soup*, a program presented live, in color, from Automation House. Despite their move to a high-end production facility in a chic, uptown location, the group's off-beat look at political power in America remained undiluted.

The desire for access to more sophisticated production tools led to the creation of the TV Lab at WNET/13 in 1972. Starting with an annual budget of \$375,000, in a \$400-per-month studio, the TV Lab was funded by NYSCA and the Rockefeller Foundation. Until it closed in 1984, it provided production grants and residencies for hundreds of film- and videomakers. While the lab's budget was small by commercial TV standards, for many artists it represented an opportunity to work in a "high-end" facility. Nam June Paik's *Global Groove* and other early tapes appropriating commercial TV, Bill Viola's elegant meditative works from the late seventies, and *Art Herstory*. Hermine Freed's humorous 1972 re-reading of the history of art, were produced at the Lab and aired on Thirteen.

It was to the Lab's director, the late David Loxton, that Michael Shamberg of Top Value Television (TVTV) brought his proposal for *The Lord of the Universe*, an hour-long documentary on the activities of the Guru Maharaj Ji. At a time when television news organizations had yet to make the leap from 16mm film, TVTV linked the styles and techniques of the New Journalism then in vogue to emerging video technologies, thus pioneering a new means of imagemaking for television. (4)

Having produced two shows on the 1972 political conventions, *Four More Years* and *The World's Largest TV Studio*, for cable and broadcast, the collective now turned its irreverent (camera) eye on the teen-age cult leader and his followers. In order to expose the intimidation and hints of violence lurking just below the surface of the smiling guru's multi-million-dollar enterprise, the group traveled to Houston to cover *Millennia '73*, to which thousands of the guru's

“preemies” had flocked in order to levitate the Astrodome through meditation.

Like other TVTV projects, *The Lord of the Universe* was produced for about \$30,000. WNET’s President, John Jay Iselin, was so impressed with the group’s work, that he raised additional private funds to allow the Lab to commission five more TVTV programs, among them the series *Gerald Ford’s America*. Shamberg, a founding member of Raindance, the seminal alternative media group; publisher of Radical Software with Beryl Korot and Ira Schneider; and latter-day Hollywood producer, had coined the term “guerrilla television” to describe the activities of new media makers, particularly those oriented toward exploiting the potential of cable access and small-format video. While the spirit of guerrilla television may have reached its apogee in the overlapping collectives and collaborative projects of the seventies, there has been no more consistent effort than that manifest by two alternative media groups founded a decade apart.

One rural, the other urban; each reflecting the sensibilities of their age, Lanesville TV and Paper Tiger Television represent committed alternative media. Now in its 14th year, Paper Tiger TV is comprised of media activists and artists “challenging and changing the communications industries” through their relentless critique of news and popular media delivered in a weekly series of lively halfprograms. If Paper Tiger’s efforts were prefigured by the alternative projects of the seventies - several of its founding members were veterans of earlier groups - there was no precedent for Lanesville TV. Founded by the group Media Bus in 1971, Lanesville TV made its mark as true community television. (5) Using a low-power antenna constructed by Chuck Kennedy, they produced live TV shows every Friday night consisting of interviews and short videotapes by, for and about their Catskill neighbors, throughout the seventies and into the eighties. Some members of the group remain in the Catskill region working in print and video media; others have moved on, but continue to produce engaging independent work.

As we’re continually reminded by bureaucrats, televangelists and political activists of all descriptions, the millennium is fast approaching - and independents are there. We have only to look back to 1991 and the fast response to the war in the Persian Gulf on the part of groups such as the Gulf Crisis TV Project, Not Channel Zero, Paper Tiger Television, the Deep Dish Satellite Network and others to look forward to media art and alternative media in the year 2000. With the continued consolidation of the media industries, it is essential that independent voices continue to be heard. New technologies, new media and methods of distribution pose new challenges. This may be an appropriate moment to look back to ’32, back to Brecht’s dictum - “...for innovation, against renovations.” (6)

Leanne Melia participated in numerous artists’ television projects beginning in the 1970s, and is currently organizing exhibitions in the U.S. and the Baltics.

Notes

1 Manhattan CableTelevision, now Time Warner Cable, deserves some credit for this and many of the projects discussed in this essay. An engaged Public Access Department, first under the direction of Robert Mariano, then Steve Lawrence, and Fred Ciccone, was open and receptive to the work of individual artists and arts organizations, large and small.

2 Cable Soho, renamed Soho TV and directed by Jaime Davidovich, remained active through the early 1980s, producing numerous videotapes and live projects with artists and independent producers.

3 A complete list is difficult to reconstruct, but would certainly include Jane Aaron, Andy Aaron, Eddie Becker, Skip Blumberg, Nancy Cain, Maxi Cohen, Bart Friedman, Joel Gold, DeeDee Halleck, Scott Jacobs, Chuck Kennedy, Paul MacLaaac, Bill Marpet, Esti Marpet, Fern McBride, Jack Milton, Joanna Milton, Caryn Rogoff, Elon Soltes, Parry Teasdale, Carol von Tobel and Tom Weinberg.

4 For more information on Top Value Television, see Deirdre Boyle, Video Classics: A Guide to Video Art and Documentary Tapes (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1988), pp. 70-72; and Lori Zippay, ed., Electronic Arts Intermix: Video, A Catalogue of the Artists' Videotape Distribution Service of EAI (New York, 1991), p. 186.

5 Core members of Media Bus were Jane Aaron, Skip Blumberg, Nancy Cain, David Cort, Bart Friedman, Davidson Gigliotti, Chuck Kennedy, Parry Teasdale, Carol von Tobel and Ann Woodward.

6 Bertolt Brecht. "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication." in John G. Hanhardt, ed., Video Culture: A Critical Investigation (Rochester, N.Y.: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986), pp. 53-55.

"The Council has weathered many a storm. Something has been right. The panels were "diverse" before that was a style, the administrators properly humble, the money given out cautiously, the contracts presented without condescension and always with apologies that the grants were not larger. Like those of us who have saved and promoted community gardens, the media arts administrators were there for us. There were regulations to buck, codes to develop, deals to be made in the dull halls of compromise and negotiation. There were pests to dodge and heavy boots to fend off. A salute to those gardeners with sharp hoes and green thumbs!"

DeeDee Halleck
Independent Producer

"If Sony was midwife to the video movement, NYSCA was nursemaid. The Council made it possible for the group I worked with, the Videofreex, to flee the city in 1971, for a mountainside in Lanesville. It appreciated the Legislature's sensitivity about a place called Upstate and how people there were as ready as the denizens of the metropolis to experience video. The Council nurtured the movement not just because it dispensed more money for video than any organization before or since, but because of the way it spent what it had by its determination to resist defining precisely what constituted the medium and its messengers."

Parry D. Teasdale
Managing Editor, Woodstock Times